IV. 3

Looking towards Moscow: The Ghadar Party's Engagement with Communism

ALI RAZA

The history of the leftist movement in British India has long occupied a prominent place in South Asian historiography. For the most part though, the Left has been written about in terms which retrospectively tend to limit the varied ways in which 'Communism' was received in India. Starting from the first works that were penned on the leftist movement in India, and in particular the iconic work of Overstreet and Windmiller,[1] the Left, and in particular the Communist section of it, has largely been viewed as being insufficiently nationalist. In most accounts it was accused of operating under the direct orders of the Soviet Union, which made it almost akin to a proxy agent, or a fifth column, which was, ironically, the manner in which the colonial state viewed the communist movement in India. Even if it was not viewed as such, the Left was still largely seen a passive recipient of ideas that were fashioned in Europe, and particularly in Russia which, together with its ostensibly generous provision of funds, arms, and literature, was the primary patron of 'seditious' politics in India. It is for this reason why many studies on the Left inevitably take the October Revolution as their starting point. Yet, neglected in such accounts is the multiplicity of ways in which 'Communism' was translated, created, interpreted, articulated, and selectively appropriated in

British India and in the struggles of those groups who sought to end British rule over the subcontinent.

This is precisely why it is important to highlight the Ghadar Party's engagement with 'Communism'. Ghadar, in other words, provides an excellent example of the varied ways in which 'Communism' was received in India. It also gives us an opportunity to rethink how the history of the Left has been viewed and written about in South Asian historiography. To take but one example, the leftist movement in India, in a sense, has a history which predates the October Revolution. There was a history of political radicalism, both within and beyond India, which converged with the Russian Revolution and produced diverse variants of what collectively became known as the leftist movement in India. The Ghadar Party then, is perhaps the best example of the pre-history of the leftist movement in India.

The Party, of course, has been the subject of numerous academic and popular accounts, which are perhaps far too many to cite in one paper.[2] Yet, most accounts, for good reasons, restrict themselves to analyzing the movement from its inception up to the infamous 'Hindu-German' Conspiracy case in the United States. Comparatively, the second phase of the Party, when it was reorganised following the trial, has received less attention. This paper then, will analyze the second phase of the movement when it reoriented itself towards 'Communism'.

Before doing so, it would perhaps be pertinent to point out that the Ghadar Party was but one of a number of dissident and revolutionary groups that had been formed outside British India. Some of those even predated the Ghadar Party while others worked in collaboration with it. Thus, one of the first networks for Indian radicals established in the Diaspora was founded in 1905 in London by the renowned revolutionary, Shyamji Krishnavarma. He was the founder of the *Indian Sociologist* and the famous 'India House' which became a cultivating ground for political radicalism.[3] Similarly, in Berlin, another group of dissidents, led by Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, brother of Sarojini Naidu, established an organisation that became known as the Berlin India Committee.[4]

The Committee actively worked with the German Government during the first world war in its struggle against the Raj. Likewise, in Kabul, a 'Provisional Government of India' was formed by Raja Mahendra Pratap, Maulavi Barkatullah and Obeidullah Sindhi.[5] And these networks were in addition to those that periodically operated in places like Paris, Geneva, Tokyo, and others, up until the end of the Raj. The most famous of these of course was the network run by M.N. Roy, perhaps India's most famous communist, who operated from various centres and also earned the distinction of founding the 'first' Communist Party of India in 1920.[6] He also founded the Communist Party of Mexico which was ostensibly also the first Communist Party formed outside Russia.[7] And last but not the least, there was Har Dayal, one of the founders of the Ghadar Party, who was part of a coterie of itinerant dissident activists and intellectuals who worked with various radical and anti-colonial groups.[8] In many ways then, the wider global arena was a fertile ground for anti-colonial radicalism to thrive.

With the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, anti-colonial networks across the world reoriented their focus towards Moscow, which quickly became the centre of world revolution. It is perhaps impossible to understate or convey the impact that the October Revolution had on the subordinated, oppressed, and colonized peoples of the world. This event opened the doors to limitless possibilities for political radicals and revolutionaries around the world and provided a successful example which could, with internationalist solidarities, be emulated in their own socio-political contexts. The process of emulation however, was not intended as a mere importation of a fixed set of doctrines meant to be implemented to the last letter. Rather, at this point, 'Communism' or 'Bolshevism' was more of an inspiration to anti-colonial radicals who viewed it as an event that shook the foundations of Europe and struck the first definitive blow against Imperialism. And when viewed against the backdrop of the ongoing destruction and unimaginable slaughter along the Western Front, it seemed as if it was only a matter of time before the old world order would rapidly disintegrate along with the empires it spawned across the globe. Crucially, though,

this optimism was also predicated on Lenin's declaration of support to national liberation struggles around the globe; a promise that was most clearly manifested through the founding of the Communist International, or Comintern, in 1919. Right from its very inception then, the colonial question continued to occupy a prominent place in Comintern discussions until its eventual dissolution in 1943.

As with the rest of the colonized world, the October Revolution had a profound and far reaching impact in British India too. Its reverberations travelled not just across the length and breadth of the subcontinent but beyond as well, particularly to centres around the world where networks of Indian dissidents and revolutionaries congregated. Indeed, according to Harkishan Singh Surjeet, the former General Secretary of CPI (M), the October Revolution 'awakened the oppressed peoples of the East'.[9] In the words of another Indian radical, Bejoy Kumar Sinha, it marked the 'triumph of a people heralding a new social order' and had the 'deepest impact' in 'the evolution of ideas'.[10] It is worth emphasizing that the Revolution did not merely have an impact on aspiring revolutionaries and dissidents. Rather, it also had a profound effect on the politics and thinking of constitutionally inclined nationalists and individuals long associated with parochial politics. The most intriguing example of this broad reception comes from none other than Madan Mohan Malaviya, one of the key figures in Hindu communitarian politics. According to Shaukat Usmani, who met him in connection with a campaign for the release of a political prisoner:

> Malaviyaji was very enthusiastic about the Soviet Union, and said that he would do anything for the people suffering for the sake of their ideology. Further, he exclaimed in glee, I would like to go to receive the Bolshevik Army at Peshawar if they came to liberate us.[11]

Thus, given the welcome accorded to the Bolshevik Revolution and the expectations anti-colonial radicals had from it, it was hardly surprising that Indian revolutionaries and dissidents made their way to Moscow soon after November 1917. Included in this list were luminaries like M.N. Roy, Maulavi Barkatullah, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya.

Other individuals to converge on Moscow were *muhajireen* from the famous Hijrat network. Comprised of Muslim youths, this network emerged from the Khilafat agitation in 1919, which along with the Non-Cooperation movement, was one of the most serious mass agitations against the British Raj. The Khilafat movement aimed to protect the Ottoman Caliphate – of great symbolic significance to many Muslims worldwide – that was under threat of being dismantled following the victory of the Allied powers in the first world war. In protest at their position as subjects of a colonially administered territory that was branded by clerics as the Dar-ul-Harb, thousands of Indian Muslims – composed of students, traders, peasants, service professionals, among others, and largely hailing from the United Provinces (UP), the Punjab and the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) – obeyed religious *fatwas* which called for an en masse migration of Muslims from India. Aside from defending and preserving their religious autonomy that was perceived to be under dire threat, many also migrated with the hope of making their way to Turkey to bolster the faltering Caliphate. Others aimed to direct their ire against the British Raj. The harsh experiences of migration, however, soon dispelled any romantic notions that these individuals may have had. Initially the *muhajireen* were welcomed by Amir Amanullah of Afghanistan, who intended to use this movement as a bargaining chip against the British. Very soon though, these individuals overstayed their welcome. For various reasons, which included the burden they imposed on the Afghan Government for their sustenance, they were expelled from Afghanistan by the Amir. Stung by the treatment they received at the hands of their erstwhile patron, the *muhajireen* stumbled, half starved, poorly equipped and perpetually cold, across Central Asia in their futile attempt at reaching Turkey. On the way they were continually harassed and persecuted by 'Turkomans' who, like Amanullah, they thought were their 'Muslim brothers'. More significantly, however, they also encountered a nascent Soviet Union, which at the time, was extending its power and influence in Central Asia against the counter revolutionary forces.[12] Together, the experiences of disillusionment and the encounters which inspired

them in the Soviet Union, led many to reassess their political and ideological inclinations as well as their cultural and religious imaginations. Accordingly, many abandoned their dreams of going to Turkey and instead ended up at Tashkent where, along with M.N. Roy, they founded the Communist Party of India in 1920. Later, they travelled to Moscow where they engaged with anti-colonial dissidents and representatives of Communist Parties from across the world. Most of them were later arrested, tried and convicted as they attempted to slip into India. Despite this apparent failure though, the Hijrat network produced luminaries like Shaukat Usmani, F.D. Mansur, Fazal Elahi Qurban, and M.A. Majid, who played a seminal role in the communist movement in India.

The politics of disillusionment and new encounters led the Ghadar Party to orient itself towards Moscow in its bid to continue its struggle against the Raj. The relationship of Ghadar with the Soviet Union was far more sustained and prolonged than the networks mentioned above. Among the first Ghadarites who turned to the Soviet Union was Santokh Singh. A son of an orderly of a colonel in the British Indian Army, Santokh Singh was born in Singapore in 1893. Shortly after his father's retirement in 1903, his family returned to their ancestral village in the Punjab. After being schooled there, he made his way to North America for higher education. Instead of pursuing his studies, he became involved in migrant politics and joined the Ghadar Party in San Francisco. Elected as the Party's Secretary, Santokh Singh was at the forefront of organising the Ghadar rebellion. He then proceeded to South East Asia where he was charged with mobilizing Indian diasporic communities towards lending their support to the Ghadar rebellion. Like its counterpart in the Punjab, this mission too ended in failure, especially since the German Government did not deliver its promised arms to the rebels. As a result, Santokh Singh was forced to return to the United States in 1916 where he was promptly arrested and convicted in the famous San Francisco Conspiracy Case on the charge of conspiring with the German Government.[13] The experience of imprisonment, however, proved to be a seminal event in his political career. True to the assertion ascribed to Lenin that jails are universities for

communists, Santokh Singh educated himself while in prison. Among the books found in his possession were three volumes of *Capital* and works such as *Russian History* and *Soul of the Russian Revolution.*[14] Additionally, he was also introduced to Marxism and the ideals of the October Revolution by fellow inmates, some of whom were professed communists.[15] Later, on his release from prison in 1919, he set about reorganising the Ghadar Party which had fallen into disarray on account of internal strife.

Joining him in this task was Rattan Singh, alias Santa Singh, alias Hari Singh, alias Ishar Singh, alias Ghulam Muhammad; he was the roving revolutionary par excellence. Hailing from district Jullundur, he migrated to Fiji in 1904 and thereafter to Vancouver in 1907.[16] He became involved in the Ghadar Party and in the next few decades travelled throughout the globe in pursuit of his revolutionary ambitions. With the reorganisation of the Party and its reorientation towards 'Communism', he travelled with Santokh Singh to Moscow after obtaining the required clearance from the CPUSA. Both men attended the fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922 as well as the second Congress of RILU (Red International of Labour Unions). Beyond that, very little is known about what the duo did in Moscow, except that they could have taken a three or four month course at the famous University of the Toilers of the East. Sufficiently motivated by their stay in Moscow, the two proceeded through Central Asia in 1923 with the intention of slipping into British India from the north western border. Rattan Singh stayed in Kabul to man the Ghadar centre there while Santokh Singh attempted to proceed to the Punjab in order to launch a vernacular 'communist' publication. However, not unlike the returning *muhajireen* before him, Santokh Singh too was arrested, but instead of being tried in court, he was incarcerated in his village for nearly a year.[17] Released in 1925, he continued from where he had left off and together with likeminded radicals, succeeded in bringing out the monthly *Kirti* (worker) in February 1926. Its opening statement declared:

> The journal will be the voice of Indian workers living in America and Canada and will be dedicated to the sacred memory of those heroes and martyrs who awakened

sleeping India and whose ideal was regarded by our own people as well as by outsiders as the dream of Alnaschar[18]...at a time when the price of service and sacrifice was much higher than it is now. The journal will work for all the workers throughout the world, the entire female sex, the subjugated, weak and oppressed nations and subjugated India.[19]

Here then, was a fusion of political strands which would have seemed uncomfortable with each other prior to the October Revolution. One the one hand, the journal clearly invoked the ideals and sacrifices of the Ghadar movement (and implicitly, the Akali movement), yet at the same time, it explicitly referred to the internationalist ideals and solidarities of the time, whereby each and every struggle for and by the oppressed, of various varieties, around the world, was inextricably linked to each other. This above all, was the effect which the 'Internationalist Moment' had on Ghadar and Kirti politics.[20] And this sentiment was not just restricted to this announcement alone. Rather, as further editions of the *Kirti* proved, global concerns and events were very much a part of the paper's agenda. They were also an integral part of the politics of the Kirti Kisan Party which was founded shortly after the paper was launched. Thus, the first Kirti conference in 1927 began its proceedings with a message of solidarity from the 'labourers of Berlin'.[21] Unfortunately, for Santokh Singh though, he did not live long enough to see his cherished dream reach fruition. He died in 1927 – a victim of tuberculosis he is said to have contracted during the period he was detained – just a few months short of the Kirti movement's inaugural conference.[22] The movement he started continued to play a prominent role in the leftist politics of the Punjab.

Santokh Singh and Rattan Singh were by no means the last Ghadarites who went to Moscow. Over the next decade and more, scores of Ghadarites and Kirtis made their way to the Soviet Union. Joining them in their journeys towards political radicalism were individuals who emerged from other radical networks. Yet few, if any, could equal the sheer expanse of the Ghadar. The Party's network extended to mostly Punjabi diasporic communities spread across the globe. Ghadar centres operated in places as geographically distant as Fiji, New Zealand, East Africa and Argentina.

It should be emphasized that not all centres of Ghadarite activity were equally active. Neither did they fulfil similar functions. East Africa in particular, like the Kabul centre, was used as a staging post for correspondence between the Ghadar-Kirtis in India and elsewhere.[23] Regardless of their function, nearly all centres sent their activists to Moscow. A key role in this regard was played by Ghadar emissaries and in particular by Rattan Singh, who travelled to various Ghadar centres seeking 'students' for political training in Moscow. Thus, in 1933, for instance, there were thirty five Ghadar 'students' in Moscow from Argentina, California, Panama, East Africa, Fiji, New Zealand and India. Included in this batch were stalwarts like Iqbal Singh Hundal, Jaswant Singh Kairon, Teja Singh Swatantar, Bhagat Singh Bilga, and Acchar Singh Chhina, among others, all of whom were to play a seminal role in leftist politics in the Punjab until Partition and beyond.[24] Moreover, while an exact figure of 'students' is difficult to ascertain, it is estimated by Sohan Singh Josh that more than seventy Ghadarites eventually travelled to the Soviet Union.[25]

The global reach of this network meant that it wasn't merely the British Indian Government that was concerned with the movements of Ghadarites. Rather, authorities across the British Empire and the Commonwealth, together with governments who cooperated with the Empire on account of shared concerns or *quid pro quo* arrangements,[26] kept a close eye on revolutionary activities. Insofar as the British Empire was concerned, special instructions were issued to consular officials situated in known centres of Ghadarite activity to keep a close eye on passport applications which may be filed by aspiring revolutionaries for their travels to Moscow. Despite these measures, it was generally recognized that passport control was 'for the most part, ineffective'.[27] Thus, despite severe difficulties, there were ways, as the accounts of Ghadarites frequently attest to, of evading the system of imperial control. Additionally, measures for restricting the movement of revolutionaries were put in place by other territories. Thus, the New Zealand Government attempted to introduce legislation which took away the civic rights of individuals who travelled to the Soviet

Union.[28] Similarly, in Fiji, authorities proceeded to proscribe and destroy Party literature that was shipped from San Francisco and elsewhere.[29] Needless to suggest, these measures were in addition to the vast network of intelligence gathering that the Empire deployed across the globe.[30] Notwithstanding their fears about its perceived ineffectiveness, this was by far the most effective method the British used to counter the threat posed by Communist Internationalism. Indeed, a measure of this network's efficacy can be gauged from the fact that there is a remarkable degree of congruency between the accounts of Ghadarites and the intelligence reports issued by the colonial authorities. For the most part then, the British Indian Government was well aware of the movements of revolutionaries, their identities, and even their pseudonyms, which the Soviets gave Indian activists in an attempt to conceal their real identities. Indian 'students' were not allowed to disclose their real identities even to each other.[31] Yet many 'students' were arrested soon after they returned to India.

Given these stringent measures, Ghadarites and other revolutionaries frequently had to take extraordinarily circuitous routes to travel to the Soviet Union, or indeed back to India. For activists in India, there were two primary routes through which they could reach the Soviet Union. One obviously was the land route through Central Asia, which went through Persia or the north western frontier. The sea route was another possibility, though far more difficult owing to the near impossibility of obtaining legitimate travel documents for travelling to the Soviet Union. For activists in other centres, the sea route was the only choice available.[32] Both often entailed lengthy detours and considerable personal risk. For returning to India from the Soviet Union, Naina Singh Dhoot, for instance, had to travel to Cuba from France in order to obtain a new passport before sailing for Colombo from where he later caught a boat to Madras.[33] Others, like their Hijrat predecessors, had to take hazardous routes over the Pamirs and other mountain ranges in the north western frontier of British India.

For most individuals, their first forays abroad were not in search of revolution. As elsewhere in India, the vast majority initially left

the Punjab in search of a better livelihood. It was only once they reached foreign shores that many became inclined towards radical political activism. Naina Singh Dhoot typifies this particular political trajectory. Born in 1904 in the village of Dhoot Kalan in Hoshiarpur district, he was compelled on account of various circumstances to leave for Singapore in 1927. While doing odd jobs there, he became aware of the Ghadar Party and its literature, particularly the famed *Ghadar di Goonj*. Later, he decided to proceed to Argentina via Ceylon and France. After some difficulties in entering Argentina, which he attributed to the callousness of the British Empire, he worked on maize farms where he first came in touch with the ubiquitous Rattan Singh. Soon, he ended up in Rosario, which became renowned for playing host to a thriving Ghadar network. There, he and his fellow Punjabis were visited by another ubiquitous Ghadar emissary, Teja Singh Swatantar, who obtained military training in Turkey and later set out to organise Ghadar cells in Panama, Brazil and Argentina. The cell which was established in Rosario regularly received Party literature and worked amongst Punjabi workers.[34] It also sent the largest batch of activists to Moscow.[35] As Dhoot acknowledged later, the understanding of these individuals of 'Marxism', or even the Soviet Revolution, was exceedingly limited.[36] Instead, they were driven with the sole objective of freeing India from British rule. Many, including Dhoot, had declared their intention of sacrificing their *tan, man,* and *dhan* (body, mind and wealth) for their Party and the freedom struggle.[37] Motivated by Teja Singh Swatantar and Rattan Singh, these individuals also agreed to travel to the Soviet Union where they would learn, or so they thought, the tactics of revolutionary terrorism.

Matters in Moscow were somewhat more complicated than what they imagined. Bringing about a revolution was not simply a question of military tactics or guerrilla warfare. It was more an outcome of intensive political education. That might have come as an unpleasant surprise to some who were chafing to return to India as soon as possible in order to participate in the freedom struggle. Yet, they could do so only when they had the requisite political training which Moscow was best equipped to provide. Since the

early 1920s, the city had developed an elaborate infrastructure commensurate with its uncontested position as the centre of world revolution. A number of institutions and organisations had been established for training aspiring revolutionaries from all over the world. Most Indians were dispatched to the renowned University of the Toilers of the East. It was alleged, and not entirely without reason, that the University

> Trains agitators, both foreign and Russian, and the curriculum includes: Marxism, Leninism, historical materialism, Marxian economics, economic geography, Marxian history, and the language of the country of which the student is a native, or to which Russian pupils are eventually to be sent; agitation, building up of cells, public and secret, military tactics; field work; and musketry.... Moreover... students are taught in addition to one 'official' language, an extra one, which they must master completely; but never in any circumstances may they betray their knowledge of it.[38]

There were many other institutes in Moscow and the Soviet Union to train students from different parts of the world in the theory and practice of bringing about socialistic revolution.[39] It was hardly surprising, then, that this impressive infrastructure drew anti-colonial radicals and revolutionaries from all across the world. Coupled with this was the attraction of engaging with political activists from varying contexts, and the patronage and support offered by the Comintern, the first port of call for revolutionaries who managed to make their way to Moscow. This organisation was a global platform for communist parties representing every corner of the globe. In theory, at least, the Comintern was independent from the Soviet Government, but in practice it often functioned as a very effective arm of Soviet foreign policy. The claims of Comintern autonomy were important for maintaining the official Soviet line of non-intervention in other territories.[40] These rhetorical distinctions, however, were obviously lost on other governments who viewed the Comintern as part and parcel of the Soviet state machinery. As they viewed it, the Comintern was the chief patron of 'subversive' activities within their territories.

Before these 'students' were accepted for training in institutes like the University of the Toilers of the East, a thorough analysis of

their class background and political potential was conducted. Some tragically failed this test. Thus, one Hazara Singh Hamdam was sent back after a mere six days because his father possessed 30 acres of land, which presumably made him a 'kulak' and thus a counter revolutionary.[41] Educational qualifications apparently mattered little to the administrators as highly qualified students were accepted along with the completely illiterate. This was certainly the case with many Ghadarites who were accepted for training despite being unlettered. Students from the ages of 16 to 50 were accepted for enrolment and housed in communal quarters.[42] Though this was rarely expressed in the glowing accounts of the revolutionaries themselves, colonial reports suggested that the living conditions of 'students' were bad. Thus, in one 'students home' it was discovered that 'twenty pupils were living in one large room, their mattresses covering almost the entire floor'.[43] According to 'Dada' Amir Haider Khan,[44] the majority of students in the Toilers of the East were from the Soviet Union whose main task was to 'consolidate the power of the Soviets and to build Socialism'. The second group was largely from 'the colonial and semi-colonial east'. Aside from other territories, these included revolutionaries from Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Japan, Morocco, Tunisia, as well as 'a few Negroes from the USA'. The largest contingent came from China. The primary tasks of these students involved working with their respective national liberation movements and communist bodies.[45]

For the most part, students were grouped according to their ethnic and territorial origin and assigned specialists tasked with their education and training. Each group had its own managing committee and faculty. Thus, Naina Singh Dhoot and his fellow course mates were entrusted to Soviet professors who were fluent in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu. His batch of ten Punjabi students was taught separately, with extracurricular activities forming a key part of their schedule. Aside from visits to the theatre and cinema, frequent excursions were also organised along with participation in grand public processions which commemorated events such the October Revolution and the May Day.[46] Generally, as part of their educational training, students were required to learn Russian and

keep themselves updated with the latest political developments. For Indian students, a key part of their course was the daily reading of newspapers which were translated and discussed by their interlocutors at the University. Additionally, they were also taught political and economic geography, anthropology, Marxist philosophy, and history, with a special emphasis on the history of revolutionary movements, the Bolshevik Revolution in particular, and the history of the First, Second and Third Internationals. Another integral part of the curriculum was the study of the Soviet State and the CPSU.[47] Naina Singh and his compatriots were taught in Punjabi and when a teacher delivered a lecture in English, it was simultaneously translated into Punjabi. Most significantly, at least as far as the 'students' from colonized territories were concerned, military training constituted a key part of their 'education'. An army officer gave daily lectures on the various aspects of 'military science'. Camping trips were also organised in which further training took place. Here, revolutionaries were trained by the Red Army officers in the use and maintenance of various rifles, heavy machine guns, pistols, revolvers and hand grenades. They were also required to draw topographical maps and demonstrate their familiarity with military science. Each student was required to 'act as a commander and assigned a specific task like destroying an enemy installation with the help of a contingent of soldiers, arms, maps, etc'.[48]

After the completion of their 'course,' arrangements were made for students to return to their territories, except for those who had been selected, like Dhoot, for further training and education. Generally, the imperial intelligence and security services were well aware of who was returning to India from the Soviet Union. As a result, many Ghadarites were traced and arrested once they managed to reach India. A few, despite their training in withstanding duress, succumbed to police torture and betrayed their comrades along with a number of secrets.[49] For Naina Singh, one culprit was Karam Singh Dhuieta, who revealed to the CID the route his batch took to get to Moscow and from there to India.[50] This naturally made it more difficult for the Comintern to arrange a safe passage for revolutionaries to make their way to Moscow and more

importantly, back to India. Compounding this problem was the allegation that many students were not the 'right material'. On a few occasions, colonial intelligence intercepted communications from the Comintern in which it expressed disappointment at the 'quality' of students, especially those that were sent from India.[51] Despite their intensive training and education, a number of Moscow graduates were not considered to be effective or committed cadres. Neither were they viewed as 'proper' communists, especially by individuals like Josh who was a member of the CPI's 'Official Group' in the Punjab. An intelligence report on the Indian students in Moscow provides a key:

> It is generally considered that these have not been a great success, the type which has hitherto come forward, or been selected having proved too idealistic, or else more concerned with the Nationalist movement in India itself than with the larger issue of world revolution.[52]

This statement is quite revealing of the multiple interpretations and uses of 'Communism' in India. The Ghadar-Kirti network was not the only group which engaged with 'Communism' with its primary objective of achieving freedom from British rule. Rather, a number of radical networks and dissidents approached the Soviet Union with the sole purpose of advancing their respective struggles. 'Communism', therefore, was far removed from a fixed set of doctrines that it is retrospectively assumed to be. It meant different things to different people in different times. This was particularly the case in the 1920s, before the process of Stalinization started purging alternate and dissenting articulations within the Soviet Union. Indian 'Communism' too, for various reasons, became much more defined and 'orthodox' in the 1930s. It was largely in the light of the changes brought about by these interlinked processes which set new benchmarks in leftist politics that some Ghadar-Kirti students were considered to be far too 'idealistic' and not a 'great success'.

Despite their alleged tendency to chart their own course, the Ghadar-Kirti combine was remarkable for retaining its connections with the Comintern alongside the CPI. This was especially significant since the CPI was, officially speaking, a section of the Communist International, and by extension, the sole representative

of 'communists' in British India. From its very inception, the Comintern had recognized only one party in each country which bore the title 'Communist' for the purposes of membership in the International. Yet, for the most part, and especially during the 1930s, the Comintern engaged with both groups. This was despite the fact that neither group acknowledged the legitimacy of the other. According to intelligence reports, the Ghadar-Kirti network – despite cooperating with and soliciting support from the Comintern – was ultimately suspicious of Moscow's intentions. As far as the Comintern was concerned, this suspicion was mutual. The network consistently refused to accept the leadership of the CPI, and unlike the latter, laid no claim to being a section of the Communist International. Neither would this claim have been tenable since the CPI had already taken that position. Yet, despite their tenuous relationship with Moscow, the Kirti network consistently tried to contest the CPI's position in an attempt to secure the ultimate mandate of the Comintern as the undisputed leader of communist politics in India. For its part, the CPI tried to bring the Ghadar-Kirti network to heel for much the same reasons. But there was another important reason why the CPI and the Kirti group found it difficult to amalgamate into one body. As on previous occasions, this issue involved the control of funds. The Ghadar-Kirti network was the beneficiary of substantial funds that were remitted from the Punjabi diaspora abroad and they wished to retain their autonomy and control over those funds. The CPI for its part, and especially its Punjab unit, was eager to exercise its control over the funding network.[53] The role of finances in leftist infighting was often disproportionately stressed in colonial reports. They were also often off the mark on how crucial the Soviet Union was in funding the communist movement in India and the Punjab. As individuals like Josh have repeatedly stressed, the Punjab communist movement as represented by the Kirtis was largely self sufficient in funds due to the substantial sums that were remitted by the Punjabi diaspora around the world.[54] Nevertheless, disputes over financial matters and allegations of embezzlement and corruption continued to be a prominent feature of leftist factionalism.

Issues of finances and personality clashes aside, ideological and political disputes were also important in the rift between the Ghadar-Kirti network and the provincial CPI. This is where the Ghadar-Kirti combine staked a unique position for itself in the annals of the Leftist movement in British India. The network had strengthened its relationship with the Comintern after M.N. Roy was unceremoniously expelled from the organisation on account of the China debacle.[55] Following Roy's expulsion in 1929, the Ghadar Party was virtually the only organised political network outside of India that could potentially work with the Comintern. Its differences with the CPI and its affiliates in the Punjab were due also to what Gurharpal Singh calls its ingrained sense of 'anti-intellectualism'. There was a suspicion within the Ghadar-Kirti network, even among those who had graduated from Moscow, that doctrinaire or orthodox communism had little relevance for the regional particularities of the Punjab.[56] The CPI and its affiliates in the Punjab, led by Sohan Singh Josh, in turn viewed the Ghadar-Kirti network with considerable distaste on account of its divergent articulation of communist politics. This tension has perhaps been most eloquently summed up by Bhagat Singh Bilga, a stalwart of the Ghadar-Kirti network, who wryly remarked: 'We did not know English, and they did not know politics'.[57] These differences continued to divide the Punjabi leftist movement until unity between the two factions was forged in 1942. Prior to that, the Ghadar-Kirti movement had approached the Comintern on numerous occasions in order to secure its exclusive mandate. To that end, Acchar Singh Chinna and Ram Krishan 'B.A' (who tragically died along the way) were sent to Moscow in 1940 with a report on the achievements of the Ghadar-Kirti movement and the alleged digressions of its rival CPI faction.[58] That was when the second world war was still considered an 'Imperialist War'. The launching of Operation Barbarossa, however, changed all that. With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the CPI adopted the 'People's War' line. Owing to the exigencies of war, the Comintern advocated communist unity and pressed the Kirti group to come under CPI discipline.[59] In addition to Comintern pressure, this unity was made possible owing to the

discussions which the rival bodies had in Deoli camp.[60] Finally, in mid 1942, the Punjab had its first united communist party, a development which lasted only for five years; the Party again broke up into the familiar Kirti and CPI camps.

Conclusion

The Ghadar movement, then, deserves a place of its own in the annals of the Indian Leftist movement. While its role in fomenting political radicalism in India has been widely acknowledged, its specific contribution to the development of 'Communism' in British India has been comparatively neglected. In particular, its role in the communist movement has been neglected by the official accounts produced by both factions of the Communist Party of India. Perhaps, the Ghadar movement and its allied Kirti network in the Punjab were considered far too heterodox by writers keen to produce a sanitized history of the communist movement before and after Independence. Yet, this is precisely why both are crucial to the history of the Leftist movement in British India. After all, these networks showed the varied ways in which 'communism' found root in the Punjab, and by extension, in British India. The Ghadar movement, thus, considerably enriches the history of the Left and there can be no better moment than its centenary to remind ourselves of this fact.

NOTES

1. Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959.
2. For the most useful amongst these works see, Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement and Ghadar Party: Its Role in India's Struggle for Freedom*, New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1997; Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation and Strategy*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983; and Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; G.S. Deol, *The Role of the Ghadar Party in the National Movement*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1969; and lastly, Khushwant Singh and Satindra Singh, *Ghadar 1915: India's First Armed Revolution,* New Delhi: R & K Publishing, 1966. Also useful for providing a view from a stalwart of the Punjabi Leftist movement, is the work of Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadr Party: A Short History*, 2 vols. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977.
3. For more details see, Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Sanskrit, Sociology and Anti-Imperial Struggle: The Life of Shyamji Krishnavarma (1857-1930)*, Delhi: Routledge India, 2008.
4. See, for instance, Nirode K. Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
5. For a brief account of this experiment as well as the 'Silk Letter Conspiracy', see Michael O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew it: 1885-1925*, London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1926, 3rd edn., pp. 172-82.
6. There is a dispute between the CPI and CPI (Marxist) on whether the Party was 'first' formed in Tashkent in 1920 or in Kanpur in 1925.
7. While there are numerous works available on M.N. Roy, there are a few that are particularly useful. See, for instance, the most recent biography on Roy by Kris Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism,* Delhi: Routledge, 2010.
8. See Emily C. Brown, *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975.
9. Jyoti Basu, ed., *Documents of the Communist Party of India (1917-28)*, vol. 1, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997, pp. xxvii.
10. Shaukat Usmani, *Historic Trips of a Revolutionary*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1977, pp. 87-88.
11. Ibid., p. 90.
12. There are a number of useful accounts on the Hijrat movement and the journeys of the *muhajireen.* For a brief account see, K.H. Ansari, 'Pan Islam and the Making of the Early Muslim Socialists', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 509-37. For a more extended treatment, see, K.H. Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims*, Lahore: Book Traders, 1990. Also see, Dietrich Reetz, *Hijrat - The Flight of the Faithful: A British File on the Exodus of Muslim Peasants from North India to Afghanistan*

in 1920, Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1995. Especially important are accounts of the *muhajireen* themselves. See the works of Shaukat Usmani, one of the co-accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case and previous Conspiracy Cases: *Historic Trips of a Revolutionary: Sojourn in the Soviet Union; Peshawar to Moscow: Leaves from an Indian Muhajireen's Diary*, Benares: Swaraj Publishing House, 1927; and *I Met Stalin Twice*, Bombay: K. Kurian, 1953.

13. Nine German subjects, four 'German-American', five Americans, and seventeen Indians were prosecuted during this case, and all bar one, were found guilty. Ever since the launch of the *Ghadar* and the founding of the Party, the British Consul under directions from the Foreign Office, had repeatedly urged the United States authorities to act against Ghadarites, censor their letters and prevent their publications from wider dissemination. They were frustrated in their attempts by what they perceived to be an inexplicable reluctance of the US authorities to act against the Party. All that changed, however, with the entry of the US in the first world war. The San Francisco Conspiracy Case was an outcome of this changed policy. The Party returned to business as usual after hostilities ended and the US resumed its ostensibly indifferent attitude. For details into these discussions see, IOR/L/P&J/12/148, Anglo Soviet Relations: Communist Propaganda in India; Relationship between the Comintern and the Ghadr Party, July 1933 – January 1935, Indian Seditious Activities in the US (P&J (S) 299 1934), p. 63.
14. Sohan Singla Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History*, vol. II: *Towards Scientific Socialism,* New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1978, p. 199.
15. Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh and on other Early Revolutionaries*, New Delhi: Communist Party of India, 1976, p. 69.
16. *Ghadar Directory*, 1934, p. 250.
17. Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party*, vol. II, pp. 214-21. Also see, IOR/V/27/262/3, D. Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-1927*, Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1927, pp. 150-57.
18. Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-27*, p. 157. Also, the part about the dream of Alnaschar' is a reference to a fable in the Arabian Nights. The phrase itself, as used in this passage, refers to an impossible dream or a fantasy.

19. Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh*, p. 73.
20. See, Ali Raza, Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, eds., *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World Views, 1917-39,* New Delhi: Sage (forthcoming).
21. Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence (PPSAI), Lahore, 15 October 1927, no. 40, p. 447.
22. IOR/L/P&J/12/300, Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha, File no. P&J (S) 1013, 1932, p. 1.
23. IOR/L/P&J/12/148, Anglo-Soviet Relations: Communist Propaganda in India: Relationship between the Comintern and the Ghadar Party, July 1933-January 1935, File no. P & J (S) 834 1933, Extract from DIB Weekly Report – no. 17, dated 4 May 1933.
24. IOR/L/P&J/12/148 (Anglo Soviet Relations), Secret Letter to H. Williamson, 2 August 1933, File no. P&J (S), pp. 1-2.
25. See Appendix ten of Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party*, pp. 330-32. In addition, Amarjit Chandan has also painstakingly compiled a list of Moscow trained Ghadarites, which he very kindly shared with the author.
26. Not so surprisingly, perhaps, these agreements were concluded with the Soviet Union as well. The best example of this was the closure of the Tashkent military school following the Anglo Soviet Trade agreement.
27. IOR/L/P&J/12/148, Anglo-Soviet Relations, File no. P&J (S) 834, 1933, p. 3.
28. Ibid., p. 4.
29. IOR/L/P&J/12/148, Anglo-Soviet Relations, Extract from DIB Weekly Report - no. 17, dated 4 May 1933.
30. For a detailed account of this network see Richard J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904-1924*, Routledge, 1995.
31. IOR/L/P&J/12/148, Anglo Soviet Relations, Secret Letter to H. Williamson, 2 August 1933, P&J (S), p. 2.
32. There was also an 'Indian Club' operating in Hamburg. See, Ali Raza and Benjamin Zachariah, 'To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble: The Lascar System, Politics, and Agency in the 1920s', in *Itinerario* (International Journal on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction, CUP), vol. 36, no. 3, 2012 (published in 2013).

33. Surinder Singh, ed., *The Political Memoirs of an Indian Revolutionary: Naina Singh Dhoot (1904-1989)*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, pp. 117-21 [henceforth *Political Memoirs of Dhoot*].
34. Ibid., pp. 86-101.
35. Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party*, vol. II, p. 288.
36. As an anecdote, Dhoot recounted that whenever they came across the term 'Red Army' in Ghadar literature they 'assumed it was so called because its soldiers were clad in Red'. *Political Memoirs*, p. 100.
37. Ibid., pp. 86-101.
38. IOR/L/P&J/12/412 (Communist training schools for Indians in Moscow and Tashkent), Letter from Sir E. Ovey to Mr. A. Henderson, 7 July 1930, pp. 2-4.
39. Ibid., Extract from Report by New Scotland Yard, 5 March 1930.
40. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 51-55.
41. Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party*, p. 291.
42. Loc. cit.
43. IOR/L/P&J/12/412 (Communist training schools for Indians in Moscow and Tashkent), Letter from Sir E. Ovey to Mr. A. Henderson, 7 July 1930, p. 2.
44. 'Dada' was one of the most iconic figures in the Communist movement in British India and particularly in Pakistan. Hailing from a small village near Rawalpindi, Dada dropped out of school at an early age and made his way to Bombay where he eventually found work as a lascar. As a seaman, he travelled the world until he deserted his ship in the United States and found employment in a factory. He developed contacts with the CPUSA which, in conjunction with the Ghadar Party, made arrangements for Dada and five other Ghadarites to travel to Moscow. For details on who these 'students' were, see Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party*, pp. 275-78.
45. Hasan N. Gardezi, ed., *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary – Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan*, 2 vols., Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1988, p. 537 [henceforth, *Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan*].
46. Dhoot, *Political Memoirs*, pp. 111-13.
47. *Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan*, pp. 532-98.

48. Ibid. Dhoot, *Political Memoirs*, p. 115.
49. One of the most prominent figures who was systematically broken in this way was Harminder Singh Sodhi.
50. Dhoot, *Political Memoirs*, p. 116.
51. IOR/L/P&J/12/148 (Anglo Soviet Relations), Extract from Weekly Report, no. 24, dated Simla, 22 June 1933.
52. IOR/L/P&J/12/412 (Communist training schools for Indians in Moscow and Tashkent), Letter from Sir E. Ovey to Mr. A. Henderson, 7 July 1930, p. 1.
53. 'A Note outlining "Kirti" agitation in the Punjab and the "Kirti Lehri" Group Meerut in relation to the Communist movement in India', Subodh Roy, ed. *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents 1935-1945*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1976, pp. 225-26.
54. See, for instance, Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party*, pp. 229-33. This was in addition to Josh's repeated denials and protestations, during the Meerut trial and beyond, that the Punjab movement received funds from the Comintern.
55. Dhoot, *Political Memoirs*, p. 106. For Roy's often tense relationship with the Comintern see, John P. Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy, 1920-1939*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, and the most recent work by Kris Manjapra.
56. *Sanu angrezi nahin si aaundi, ohnaa nu siyasat.* Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab: A Study of the Movement up to 1967*, Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1994, pp. 47-56. Amongst the particularisms that he mentions, Gurharpal Singh stresses the role that 'Sikhism' played in the politics of the Ghadar-Kirti network. While it is true that Sikhism, or rather a particular interpretation of it, did play an important role in this form of politics, its role as a 'powerful cognitive map' has perhaps been exaggerated, especially since invocations to religion were virtually abandoned in communist politics by the mid 1930s. Instead, communists were increasingly vulnerable to the charges of atheism that were levelled by their erstwhile allies in the Akali movement, all of which, together with other events, culminated in a disastrous political showing of the Left in the 1940s.
57. This was recounted to me by Amarjit Chandan who interviewed Bhagat Singh Bilga.
58. 'Papers by Ram Kishen on Kirti' (translated from Russian), Comintern,

F. 495, Inv. 16, File 57a.

59. See Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab*, pp. 56-57 for a useful summary of this development.

60. Prior to that the entire leftist leadership across India had been incarcerated in Deoli camp owing to their vociferous opposition to the war. It is also debatable how important the Comintern was in this development. Gurharpal Singh has argued that the much waunted unity was a 'shot gun marriage demanded by the Comintern', p. 56. Yet, as the accounts of Deoli inmates themselves suggest, it was the experience of incarceration and the lengthy conciliatory discussions between erstwhile rivals which paved the way for eventual unity. In any case, the Comintern was a dying organisation by then. It was disbanded altogether by Stalin in 1943, while the united front in the Punjab lasted until 1947.